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SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS AND PRM
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AID/W FOR DCHA/AA MICHAEL HESS
AID/W FOR DCHA/FFP FOR JDWORKEN AND JBORNS
AID/W FOR DCHA/OFDA FOR KLUU, RTHAYER AND RKERR
BANGKOK FOR DCHA/OFDA WBERGER AND TROGERS
KATHMANDU FOR USAID/DCHA/OFDA MROGERS
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SUBJECT: SRI LANKAN MILITARY CREATES SAFE ZONE FOR CIVILIANS TRAPPED
IN NORTH

11. (U) SUMMARY: The Sri Lankan military unilaterally declared a "safe zone" northwest of Puthukkudiyiruppu (PTK) on January 21. ICRC, informed of this decision by the Sri Lankan Government, relayed the message to the LTTE. However, according to the ICRC, nothing has been prepared for people in the designated "safe zone." The question of the extent of access by UN agencies to this area also remains unresolved. In other developments, a UN food convoy which had been unable since January 16 to re-depart PTK after delivering supplies was able to leave mid-afternoon on January 22. However, the UN felt compelled to leave an international staff member and five trucks behind in order to safeguard 80 family members of UN employees the LTTE would not allow to depart, as planned, with the convoy. The UN in Sri Lanka issued a statement protesting the LTTE's refusal to allow UN national staff and their dependents to return from the Vanni with the convoy. End summary.

Safe Zone?

12. (SBU) On January 21, the Sri Lankan military unilaterally declared a "safe zone" for civilians northwest of Puthukkudiyiruppu. This 35 square kilometer safe zone, which is in the area still under the nominal control of the LTTE and therefore accessible to the estimated 250,000 IDPs, will provide an area free of GSL shelling. According to the Associated Press, the GSL issued instructions to its Government Agents in the region and dropped leaflets encouraging civilians trapped in the Vanni (and reportedly hel against their will by the LTTE) to seek sanctuary in this area without fear of Sri Lanka military selling or attacks. This safe zone had not been negotiated with or agreed to by the LTTE, since the GSL ended direct contacts with the LTTE after proscribing the organization on January 7, 2009. It is not clear that the LTTE will honor the safe area and unlikely that it will allow civilians to leave the areas still under its control.

13. (SBU) In the AP report citing military spokesman Brigadier General Nanayakkara, the Sri Lankan military distributed leaflets through aerial drops in the areas where fighting is taking place, informing civilians of the safe zone and urging them to move and stay there until the government can bring them to other locations. However, according to the ICRC, nothing has been prepared for people in the designated "safe zone." The question of the extent of access by UN agencies to this area also remains unresolved.

UN Convoy Leaves without Local Staff Dependents

¶4. (SBU) The most recent UN convoy had been stuck in PTK since January 16, unable to return safely because of fighting in the area. Until January 22, Army Commander Fonseka had reportedly refused safe passage on the grounds that hostilities were continuing. However, after Army clearance finally came, another difficulty arose. The convoy had planned to bring out approximately 80 dependents of UN local employees on the return trip. According to UN sources, the LTTE refused to let those without LTTE-issued "passes" leave. The UN Office in Sri Lanka issued a statement today protesting the LTTE's refusal to allow UN national staff and dependents to return from the Vanni with the convoy. The UN then decided to leave one of their expatriate security officials behind in PTK, along with dependents who could not obtain passes from the LTTE and five trucks from the convoy. The remaining trucks, six international staff, and five national staff that accompanied the convoy have started their journey today. UN staff will receive them at Omanthai, the former checkpoint between government and LTTE-controlled areas.

¶5. (SBU) COMMENT: In our view, the GSL's offer of amnesty for LTTE cadres (except for the top two leaders) and its welcome creation of a safe haven for civilians are moving the situation closer to a tipping point. The LTTE may soon no longer be able to hinder a large-scale movement of IDPs into government-controlled areas. The Embassy will remain in close contact with the ICRC and the UN to monitor the situation and help ensure that civilians are protected to the extent possible. We will also try to ascertain more

precisely the reasons why the UN international staff member and five trucks remained in LTTE-controlled PTK. We have been hearing for several days that those with avenues of communication with the Tiger leadership - Norway, the ICRC and the UN - are finding it increasingly difficult to maintain contact with the LTTE. This renders even more difficult the already daunting challenge of negotiating safeguards for and humanitarian access to the non-combatants.

BLAKE